



WHO ARE THE NEW LEADERS? SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE FIGURE OF THE MIDDLE LEADER IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

¿QUIÉNES SON LOS NUEVOS LÍDERES? REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA DE LA FIGURA DEL LIDERAZGO INTERMEDIO EN LAS ORGANIZACIONES EDUCATIVAS

Aleix Olondriz-Valverde (*)

Universitat de Girona

Isabel del Arco

Universitat de Lleida

Resumen

El liderazgo intermedio (LI) ha suscitado un interés creciente entre los investigadores, consolidándose como un estilo de liderazgo que combina elementos del liderazgo transformacional y del liderazgo distribuido. El LI implica la delegación de responsabilidades y funciones de liderazgo en los niveles intermedios de las organizaciones, a menudo formalizadas entre los profesionales de la educación. Sin embargo, la conceptualización, las características y las funciones del liderazgo intermedio varían de forma significativa. Con el objetivo de explorar esta figura y su heterogeneidad a nivel global, se llevó a cabo una revisión sistemática de 34 artículos indexados en la Web of Science, utilizando el modelo PRISMA. El análisis permitió clasificar los hallazgos en cinco bloques de estudio, revelando una notable variabilidad en la comprensión del liderazgo intermedio según los distintos contextos y sistemas educativos. Los resultados ponen de manifiesto la ausencia de una definición clara, así como el predominio de interpretaciones subjetivas que condicionan los roles y funciones desempeñados por estos profesionales. Asimismo, se identificó una falta de formación y desarrollo competencial específico para el ejercicio del liderazgo intermedio. Esta figura continúa representando un desafío para futuras investigaciones orientadas a alcanzar una definición y comprensión claras y consensuadas.

Palabras clave: liderazgo; organizaciones educativas; desarrollo educativo; gestión educativa; formación inicial del profesorado de Educación Primaria.

Abstract

(*) Autor para correspondencia:

Aleix Olondriz-Valverde
Plaça de Sant Domènec, 9, 17004 Girona

Contact: Aleix.olondriz@udl.cat

©2010, Perspectiva Educacional
[Http://www.perspectivaeducacional.cl](http://www.perspectivaeducacional.cl)

RECIBIDO: 03.12.2024
ACEPTADO: 27.08.2025
DOI: 10.4151/07189729-Vol.65-Iss.2-Art.1665

Educational leadership has become one of the most influential factors in improving school quality, teacher professional development, and student learning outcomes. Within this field, middle leadership (ML) has emerged as an increasingly relevant form of educational leadership, combining principles of transformational and distributed leadership. Middle leaders occupy an intermediate position between senior management and teaching staff, acting as key agents in translating educational policies into daily practice, promoting collaboration, and supporting school improvement. The purpose of this study was to examine the current state of scientific knowledge regarding middle leadership in educational organizations through a systematic literature review. Specifically, the review sought to identify the dominant research methods, conceptualizations of middle leadership, roles and competencies assigned to middle leaders, training processes, principal research lines, and emerging challenges for future investigation. A systematic review was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The Web of Science Core Collection database was searched using the terms middle leaders, middle leadership, middle leader, and middle leading. The search covered publications between 2010 and November 2024 within the category Education & Educational Research. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 174 articles were identified. Subsequently, the 40 most-cited articles were selected for full-text analysis, resulting in a final sample of 34 studies after excluding papers that did not directly address the research objectives. A qualitative thematic analysis was performed using Atlas.ti, allowing the identification of common patterns, categories, and trends across studies. The findings reveal substantial heterogeneity in the conceptualization of middle leadership. Rather than referring to a single professional profile, middle leaders are defined according to their organizational position, functions, leadership responsibilities, or specific educational contexts. Most studies describe them as professionals holding formal leadership responsibilities between school management and classroom teachers, functioning as mediators who facilitate communication, coordinate pedagogical initiatives,

and support teachers' professional learning. The review also identified a wide variety of roles attributed to middle leaders. These range from administrative and organizational management to instructional leadership, curriculum development, mentoring, professional development, and fostering collaborative cultures within schools. However, despite this broad recognition of their importance, there is little consensus regarding the competencies required to perform these roles effectively. Interpersonal communication, relational trust, leadership capacity, strategic thinking, and collaboration emerged as the most frequently mentioned competencies. Another significant finding concerns the limited attention devoted to the selection and preparation of middle leaders. Only a small number of studies explicitly examined recruitment processes or professional training. Most middle leaders are appointed based on teaching experience rather than formal leadership preparation, highlighting an important gap in leadership development. Recent studies advocate for structured professional development programmes combining formal leadership education, mentoring, coaching, and reflective practice. The review further demonstrates that research on middle leadership is concentrated predominantly in English-speaking countries, particularly Australia, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and New Zealand. Qualitative methodologies dominate the field, while quantitative and mixed-methods studies remain comparatively scarce. Overall, this review confirms the growing international relevance of middle leadership while highlighting persistent conceptual ambiguity and insufficient empirical evidence regarding its competencies and professional preparation. Future research should focus on developing internationally validated conceptual frameworks, evaluating the impact of middle leadership on school improvement and student outcomes, and designing evidence-based training models that strengthen the effectiveness of middle leaders across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: Leadership; educational organizations; educational development; management education; primary teacher education.

1. Introduction

Educational leadership is a broad field of study linked to educational quality, where numerous leadership styles, approaches, roles, and practices can be found. Many studies have suggested that pedagogic and collaborative leadership has an influence on student performance (Bolívar, 2020; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood, 2009; Robinson, 2019). At the same time, other studies (Chapman et al., 2016; Sans-Martin et al., 2016; Sepúlveda & Volante, 2019) identify educational leadership as an essential element in the improvement of educational quality.

Transformational leadership is a good example of pedagogic and collaborative leadership and it is related to Middle Leadership (ML). It is focused on motivation, inspiration, and empowerment of the members of the educational organization who are influenced to reach their maximum potential (Zadok et al., 2024). In some studies, this style has been associated to middle leadership (ML) (Taylor & Thompson, 2023), considering it as a model associated with the improvement in the effectiveness of teachers, the student's learning results, and the general performance of the school (Sepúlveda, 2019; Velarde et al., 2022).

Middle leaders are teachers who have a formal organizational responsibility (Zadok et al., 2024), who are important conduits of educational policies, and who are often required to lead, defend, and monitor the initiatives of change in their department, areas, or education stages (Highfield et al., 2024). This normally includes the responsibility of pedagogic leadership, the professional development of teachers in their department, the supervision of the development of the study plans, and the close monitoring of the performance of students (Bassett, 2016; Cantón, 2021).

Despite easily understanding where to position the education professional who performs pedagogic leadership, the figure of the ML is difficult to define and characterize, given that they do not hold a specific position, although they have an ability to influence the attitudes and behaviors of other teachers starting with leadership roles and ways to lead (Supovitz, 2018). Other studies (Cortez & Zoro, 2016; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Pinto et al., 2010) define their characteristics as practices, influences, or the nature of the relationships established by the leaders, beyond individual roles or qualities (Olondriz-Valverde et al., 2025).

Rincón (2018) describes it as the ability to influence downwards (lead and support), horizontally (collaborate, accompany, and connect) and upwards (as a technician who is knowledgeable of the practice and the system itself), from an orientation based on dialogue, participation, and the construction of consensus.

ML is, therefore, a heterogeneous model of leadership that has generated a wide range of perspectives and ways of understanding among the scientific community. This diversity of roles makes it so that professionals who practice middle leadership can be identified through many essential positions for the effective functioning of educational organizations (Cantón, 2021; Tang et al., 2022). This evolution and transmission of roles that traditionally belonged to school leaders (De Nobile, 2018; Ghamrawi, 2010; Sepúlveda & Volante, 2019), which are now associated to ML, is not due to change, trends, or fashion in educational organization. Bush (2023) justifies this new type of hierarchy and attribution of roles by highlighting the limits of time and the lack of specific knowledge of content that makes it difficult for high school leaders to perform their traditional roles (Maureira et al., 2014).

In general, and considering most of the studies on ML, we can affirm that this is one of the most effective models for implementing successful educational and pedagogic leadership, aside from playing a key role as a translator of educational policies directly to the front line of education (Skerritt et al., 2023).

1.1. Scientific production and purpose of the systematic review

The interest in the concept of middle leaders (MLs) has grown, leading to a significant increase in studies addressing this role (Harris & Jones, 2017; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017). However, Highfield et al. (2024) argued that there is still limited research examining how middle leaders work and implement curricular approaches. Evidence of this is the recent literature review conducted in New Zealand, where no examples of published empirical research could be found (Highfield et al., 2024).

As stated by Olondriz-Valverde et al. (2024), studies focused on ML are predominantly located in English-speaking countries, which means there are still few studies that can be generalized internationally outside of these contexts.

Following the evolution in scientific research aimed at improving educational quality, the main purpose of this review is to explore various aspects of middle leadership within educational organizations.

At this point, it is crucial to ask: What research methods are predominant in the field of middle leadership today? What is the conceptualization of middle leaders and their characteristics? What results and emerging study themes are associated with middle leadership? To address these questions, it has been essential to consult scientific production from recent years. Furthermore, this analysis also helps to understand the trends and evolution of middle leadership in scientific research.

2. Materials and methods

The objective of the study is to perform an analysis of the scientific production at the international level with respect to the concept of middle leadership in the area of education, in order to discover and delimit the main aspects that characterize this figure, as well as its future prospects in the leadership of educational organizations.

For this, the present analysis has been planned as a scoping review. This refers to the systematic review of the existing literature, considering the most relevant production in the field. A systematic review requires the capacity to cover concepts, sufficiently broad to provide panoramic view of the subject, in order to understand where the real study focuses are, and in turn, to find the topics that have either been saturated or minimized through time.

Before obtaining and analyzing the scientific production, some research questions were posed to guide the study at the Table 1.

Table 1

Relationship of study questions with the review variables and results

Research questions	Review variables	Results dimensions
What research methods predominate in the field of middle leadership?	a) Which are the research objectives?	Research on ML: lines of research
	b) Which population models and stages of education are studied?	
	c) Which countries and territories have the most scientific production?	
What is the conceptualization of middle leaders and their characteristics?	d) Who are the professionals identified as middle leaders?	Towards a definition of a middle leader.
	e) Which practices, roles, or functions are described as belonging to middle leaders?	Competences, roles, and functions performed by ML.
	f) Which competences and levels of training are associated to middle leaders?	ML selection and training processes.
	g) Which results and emergent research topics are associated to middle leadership?	Emergent challenges and topics in ML research.

To achieve the systematicity of this analysis, and to provide answers to the research questions, a search was performed in the Web of Science (WoS) database, in the 2010 to 2024 period, to obtain articles up to November 27th, 2024. Other databases were not used due to the extreme similarity of results for this search.

The search followed the flow diagram (Figure 1) that shows the different refinement phases proposed in the PRISMA model for systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021). The search equation [TS = ("middle leaders" or "middle leadership" or "middle leader" or "middle leading")] allowed

us to find 407 initial records. These were screened through the use of inclusion and exclusion criteria, to finally obtain 174 articles (See Table 2).

Table 2

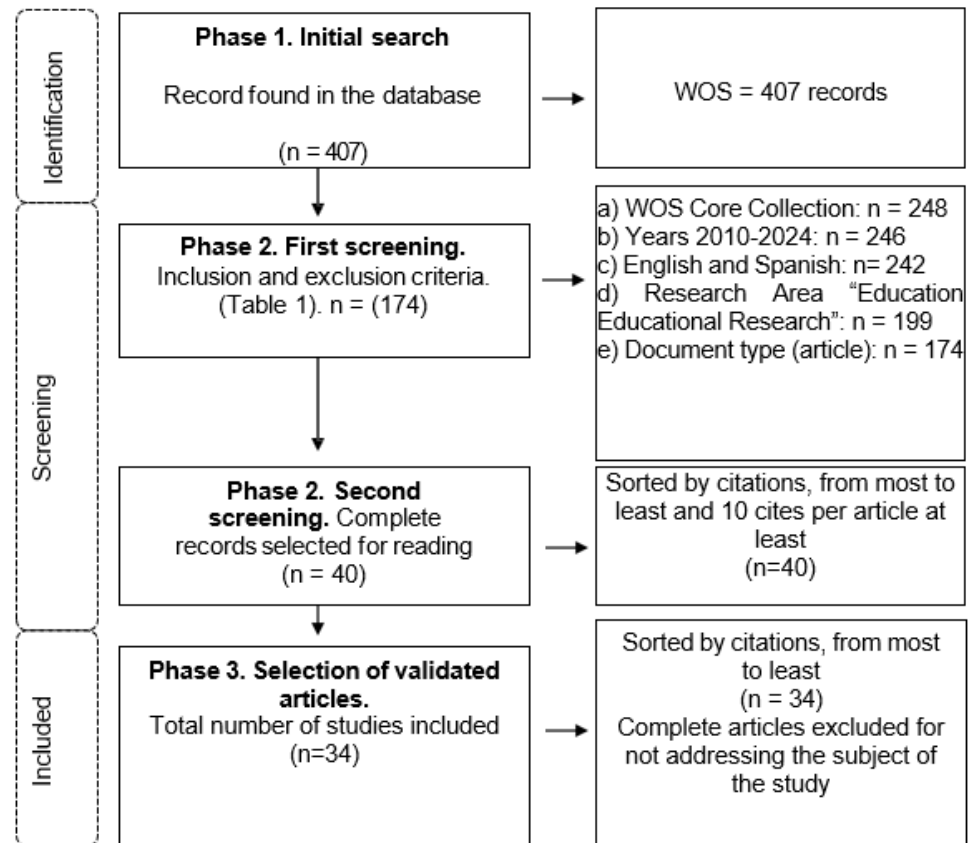
Search protocol

Filter	Selection criteria
Period of observation	2010 -2024
Database	Web of Science
Keywords	"middle leaders" or "middle leadership" or "middle leader" or "middle leading"
Inclusion criteria	1. Journal articles 2. Published between 2010 and 2024. 3. Document in English or Spanish. 4. Web of Science Core Collection. 5. Category: Education & Educational Research
Exclusion criteria	a) Conference proceedings, book chapters, or other types of publications. b) Restricted access to the publication. c) Duplicated articles. d) Articles in other languages other than English or Spanish.
Last consultation date	November 27th, 2024

Lastly, these were sorted according to the number of citations, from highest to lowest, after which the top 40 articles were selected for their complete reading and analysis. Considering this specific range based on other reviews in the field that used similar sample sizes (Lipscombe et al., 2023; Olondriz-Valverde et al., 2024). Additionally, 40 articles were selected as all of them contain a minimum of 10 citations at the time of the search (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Flow diagram of the search "middle leaders" or "middle leadership" or "middle leader" or "middle leading"



The 34 articles analyzed (Branson et al., 2016; Bryant, 2019; Bryant et al., 2020; Bryant & Walker, 2024; Bush & Ng, 2019; Creaton & Heard-Lauréote, 2021; De Nobile, 2018; Edwards-Groves et al., 2019; Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021; Farchi & Tubin, 2019; Forde et al., 2019; Franken et al., 2015; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Gu et al., 2018; Gurr, 2019; Hirsh & Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2019; Inman, 2011; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; Koh et al., 2011; LaPointe-McEwan et al., 2017; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017; Li et al., 2021; Lipscombe, Grice et al., 2020; Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford et al., 2020; Ng, 2015; Ng & Szeto, 2016; Preston & Floyd, 2016; Sepúlveda & Volante, 2019; Shaked & Schechter, 2017, 2019; Skerritt et al., 2023; Thornton et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2022) were considered the most relevant in the past few years due to the high number of citations they received.

To strengthen the transparency and rigor of the qualitative content-based analysis, several methodological clarifications are provided below.

The units of analysis were the individual scientific articles (n=34), considered as complete documents. Each article was analyzed in its entirety, including abstract, introduction, methods, results, and discussion, to identify conceptualizations, roles, competencies, and challenges related to middle leadership.

The analytical process followed a thematic coding approach, involving an initial open coding phase where recurrent themes and concepts were identified inductively. Subsequently, these were organized into broader categories in an axial coding phase, which informed the final dimensions presented in the results section (definition of ML, roles and functions, training, etc.).

The level of inference was interpretative, aiming to construct meaning from patterns and relationships emerging across the selected studies. This involved comparing and contrasting themes across different contexts, geographies, and educational stages.

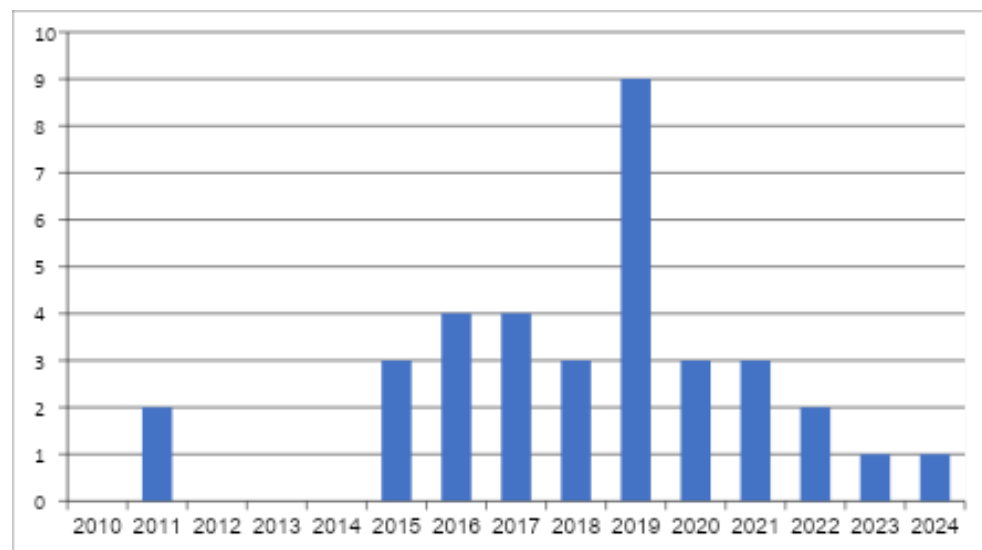
The coding was conducted using Atlas.ti 8, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitated the organization, categorization, and retrieval of codes. Analytical memos and coding matrices were generated within the software to ensure traceability and transparency of the process. The level of inference was interpretative, seeking to construct meaning from patterns and relationships across studies with varying contexts and educational stages.

To enhance validity, the findings were triangulated with previous reviews and theoretical frameworks in the field (Bryant & Walker, 2024; De Nobile, 2018). In addition, investigator triangulation was employed, as multiple authors reviewed and discussed the coding categories to ensure consistency and minimize bias.

Figure 2 shows the years of publication of the articles analyzed. Three important periods stand out.

Figure 2

Number of articles selected per year



In the first (2010-2014), we only found two articles in 2011 among the most cited. This increase was found in the initial phase of production, where middle leadership begins to arouse interest, and the initial studies serve as the reference for future ones.

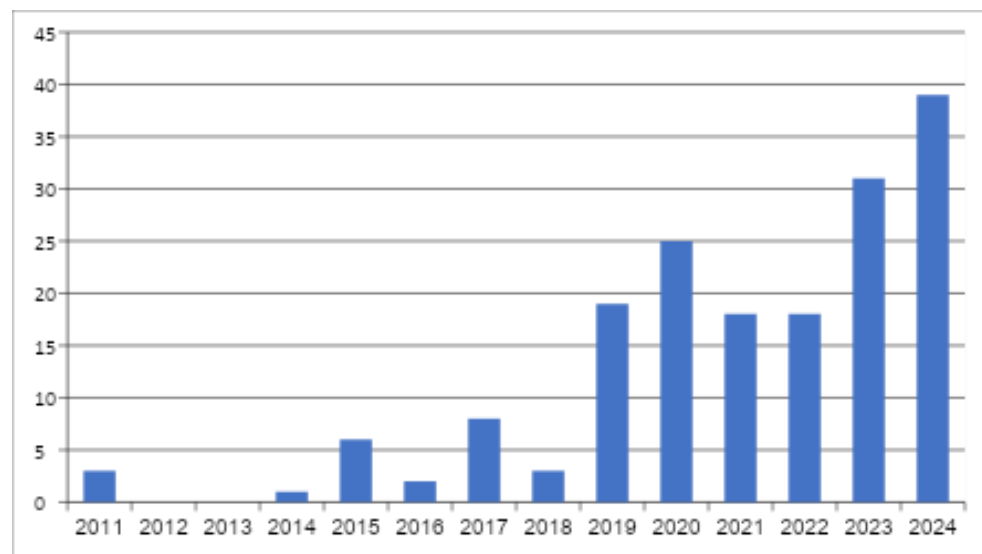
It is in the second period (2014-2019) in which the interest in middle leadership grows substantially. This is shown by the increased number of highly cited articles per year, up to 9 in 2019.

According to this, it would be expected that in the post-pandemic years (2020-2024), the number of articles would be greater. However, a decrease was observed with respect to articles with a high citation index. To understand the reasons behind this decline, we assume two hypotheses: a decrease in the interest in middle leadership, which would result in a low scientific production, or a reduction in the quality of the studies, which would imply less citations of the latter.

To discard the first hypothesis, the scientific production was analyzed with the same inclusion criteria (Table 1). Figure 3 shows all the articles found in the first screening.

Figure 3

Number of articles published per year



When comparing the two tables, it is confirmed that the scientific production on middle leadership is increasing, with a historical maximum found in 2023. This allows us to reject the idea that the topic is no longer interesting for the scientific community, in line with the conclusions of the recent bibliometric study conducted by Olondriz-Valverde et al. (2024). Therefore, we can interpret the lack of articles in the past few years as due to the lack of high-impact articles, or their being published recently, which implies that they have not been

sufficiently cited as to be found among the top 40 most-cited articles in the present systematic analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Towards a definition of a middle leader

Among the texts analyzed, we find different ways of approaching a clear and univocal definition of a middle leader. The definitions provided can be grouped according to the variable used as the reference to conceptualize the term:

As a function of the figure played by middle leadership, authors such as LaPointe-McEwan et al. (2017) either identify the figure of the middle leader in the teachers, ex classroom teachers, and even non-teaching staff, who perform support functions.

According to their performance: they assume responsibilities of management of staff, and also of specific aspects of school work. Authors such as Ganon-Shilon & Schechter (2017) or Bryant (2019) identify different thematic areas of intervention, generally cross-sectional, such as, for example: attention to diversity, ICTs, student well-being, area(s) of the curriculum, policies, and teaching. In spite of this, authors such as Farchi & Tubin (2019) or Li et al. (2021) affirm that there is no specific list of areas of intervention, as the role of the middle leader is specifically defined in the different education systems.

Priorities in their functions: many of the authors coincide in assuming that middle leaders are mainly dedicated to teaching in the classroom, at the same time that they provide support to the professional learning and development of teachers, their co-workers (Zhang et al., 2022), with a recognized leadership role (Thornton et al., 2018).

Due to their position in the organization: they occupy middle level positions in the hierarchy of the school organization (Branson et al., 2016), under the management team, creating trust among their colleagues or equals (other teachers). Authors such as Li et al. (2021) conclude by affirming that in general, the middle leaders are those who take on formal leadership and management responsibilities and tasks within a level that is located between management and teachers. Koh et al. (2011) names them middle level managers. Their middle placement allows these leaders to act as effective links between management and teaching staff, facilitating communication and the implementation of policies.

Different figures of middle leaders: in the texts analyzed, we find different figures as examples of middle leaders, such as: education level heads, subject heads, department heads, curricular leaders, curriculum heads. In the university organization, these would be department heads or

presidents, heads of schools, faculty, or other academic units that are part of the Higher Education structure, who are found under chancellor or government teams (De Nobile, 2018; Lipscombe et al., 2023).

3.2. Competences, roles and functions of a ML

Aside from finding different concepts and ways to understand what middle leadership means, the research on the competences, roles, and functions of middle leaders in educational settings reveals a diversity of responsibilities that encompass many aspects, from administrative and bureaucratic aspects, to strategic functions destined to the continuous improvement of pedagogic tasks.

As for the competences for the development of middle leadership, the literature analyzed shows a lack of a definition of the competences and skills needed for middle leaders to be efficient in their roles within the educational institutions.

In first place, Li et al. (2021) details a series of key competences for the middle leaders, which include: personal and interpersonal skills, professional skills, external promotion and relations, planning and organization, common goals and collaboration, learning of professionals and trust, perspective and culture of success, and a focus on students and their learning. This description of roles is very similar to that provided by Sepúlveda and Volante (2019), in which roles such as providing meaningful support and advice to fellow teachers, modeling competent pedagogical practices, negotiating and managing resources efficiently, and monitoring improvement processes are described.

Along the same line, Gurr (2019) points out that interpersonal and communication skills are fundamental for the efficacy of middle leaders. These competences allow them to establish solid relationships with their team, colleagues, and other members of the education community. Thus, this refers to relational competences.

Creaton & Heard-Lauréote (2021) underlines the importance of deep intellectual leadership and a clear point of view, as well as an outstanding track record in teaching, planning, and creation of income for the middle leaders. This leadership, as a capacity, is also defined in the study by Farchi & Tubin (2019), which emphasizes the need for middle leader to possess professional knowledge and the ability to lead their team, as well as a shared view and a perspective of the world that is similar to other leaders in the school.

Finally, Branson et al. (2016) highlights the importance of competences for middle leaders such as the coordination of resources and the effective interaction with other people, in the everyday management of educational activities.

Altogether, these competences form a comprehensive set of skills that middle leaders need to have and utilize in an effective manner, to contribute to the success of the educational institutions where they work, but the scarcity of their definition implies a need for future studies.

More centered on the roles and functions, the analysis conducted shows a consensus among authors at the hierarchal level, where they place ML in a mediation role between higher management and teachers, with the power to provide leadership in specific areas within the organization (Bryant et al., 2020; Farchi & Tubin, 2019; Ng, 2015).

The roles of the middle leaders have very differentiated positions as a function of each study and the perspective of the authors. Lee (2014) identifies four key practices of middle leadership, which include: (1) management and facilitation, (2) collaboration and creation of communication spaces, (3) negotiation in the relationship between teaching staff and leadership, and (4) relational positioning. These practices underline the importance of the effective management of relationships, collaborative communication, and the negotiation of roles within the school context.

To these practices, De Nobile (2018) adds the management of relationships, team leadership, efficient communication, time management, and self-management. These skills are fundamental for the success of middle leadership in complex and dynamic educational settings.

The classification by Lee (2014) allows grouping other authors who focus on the roles of ML into one of these classifications. For example, Koh et al. (2011) focuses the role on student-centered work, while other authors start from essentially bureaucratic roles and execution of tasks derived from the directors at the organizational level (Bryant, 2019; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017). In most of the cases, a differentiation is observed among those who refer to functions and roles oriented towards educational improvement, and those who place the ML in administrative and management tasks:

Among the authors who underline the ML in their key role for the improvement of education, Koh et al. (2011) affirms that working with the teachers is a key role of middle leaders. This close collaboration is perceived as essential for improving the educational experience of students (Forde et al., 2019; Lipscombe, Grice et al., 2020). LaPointe-McEwan et al. (2017), provides a view of ML as facilitators of support in school research, offering support functions for the implementation of new teaching strategies.

The development of the teaching staff is also a key function, according to Gurr (2019), where the middle leaders are dedicated to promoting and supporting learning and teaching adapted to the local context. This role includes guaranteeing that the education program is aligned with

the needs and aspirations of the students and parents, thus contributing to the continuous improvement of education quality.

On the other hand, those who think of the ML as an organizational and bureaucratic supervisor, also believe that there must be a learning support focus (Zhang et al., 2022), although more centred on administrative tasks. Edwards-Groves et al. (2019) highlights the organizational role of middle leaders, which implies knowing the school settings, sharing responsibility and commitment with the place, as well as developing and sustaining change within it. This function mirrors the ability of middle leaders to influence the organization's culture and promote innovative practices.

While many authors have a specific position with respect to the roles of ML, others highlight the lack of clarity in the roles within the schools where the studies took place (Li et al., 2021; Preston & Floyd, 2016). In many cases, the functions are associated with the position of the professional within the school, which requires them to play specific roles according to the context (Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford et al., 2020).

In conclusion, the middle leaders take on a variety of roles and functions beyond the purely administrative, encompassing essential aspects of leadership, management, and professional development.

3.3. Processes of selection and training of ML

Out of all the texts analyzed, only 4 or 5 explicitly referenced aspects related to the processes of training and selection of middle leaders. In general, middle leaders are designated by the management team of the educational organization. They are selected among those with seniority or teaching experience in the classroom, although the experience in other functions of the organization, such as the management or the coordination of projects also have an effect, among whom Thornton et al. (2018) calls successful academics.

Curiously, most of the studies analyzed maintain that the position of middle leader tends to be temporary and rotational among the same colleagues in the organization who have the required prerequisites (Creaton & Heard-Lauréote, 2021; Franken et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the relevance of this figure in the structure of the organization has resulted in the position becoming longer-lasting and more managerial in nature (Creaton & Heard-Lauréote, 2021).

When studying the existence or not of training processes for middle leaders, and what the training proposals consist of, we only find 4 articles that refer to them, coinciding in that the middle leaders themselves help school leaders to plan the succession of middle leadership by identifying and preparing colleagues who have a potential for leadership (Branson et al., 2016;

Franken et al., 2015; Koh et al., 2011; LaPointe-McEwan et al., 2017). It is starting with tutorship, reports, and coaching activities, and reflection based on experiences of support that training programs are constructed for the development of middle leadership (Branson et al., 2016).

In the past few years, research has continued to delve into these areas. The training of middle leaders has begun to incorporate more structured and systematic approaches, including formal training modules on leadership and management of education. These programs are designed not only for developing technical skills, but also for fomenting emotional and social competences necessary for efficient leadership (Bryant & Walker, 2024).

Also, the importance of mentorship among peers and collaborative learning must be underlined in the development of middle leaders. This approach, which combines practical experience with theory, allows future leaders to apply what is learned in a real context, thus improving their preparation and effectiveness.

3.4. Research on ML: lines of research

The geographical distribution, the stages of education studied, the study methods and objectives of the existing literature allow us to understand how the main lines of research are being focused, and what their results have been. Understanding research on ML and the lines of research followed also guides future researchers to recognize what the current trends were in the 2010-2024 period.

With respect to production according to country, 13 different ones were found, underlining Australia and the UK as the main locations where ML is studied, followed by Hong Kong and New Zealand. This indicates the stronger interest in English-speaking countries with regard to ML.

Leadership positions were investigated by some of the research studies in the present analysis (Bush & Ng, 2019; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017). The research methods mainly used a qualitative approach, found in 20 out of 34 articles. This implies that the instruments and studies that used interviews and case studies are representative of many of the results shown in the present article. On the contrary, only 1 article (Li et al., 2021) used modelling techniques of structural equations and multi-level analyses, with a quantitative approach. Three studies used a mixed approach, and the rest were reviews (4) and theoretical conceptual analyses (6).

Another piece of data that must be underlined is the education stage in which scientific research on ML was conducted. Although many authors identify ML positions on higher

education, only 7 studies were conducted at this stage of education, while the other 27 articles analyzed took place in Basic Education, including Primary and Secondary education.

Thus, the main lines of research were centered on Basic Education and on the application of qualitative methods. Among these, after analyzing the objectives of study, a mayor trend was observed in those that analyzed very specific aspects, such as the construction of leadership, relational trust, perception of third parties, or peer support in middle leadership (Bryant & Walker, 2024; Bush & Ng, 2019; De Nobile, 2018; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Gurr, 2019).

Lastly, it is important to highlight the main lines in which these studies coincided. These have been classified into 4 main topics:

Recognition and creation of theoretical models: Some studies were based on recognizing common practices of Middle Leadership that could be globalized, as well as the creation of a theoretical explanatory model of ML (MLiS) (De Nobile, 2018) or structures of professional learning exclusive for MLs (Bryant & Walker, 2024). In general, these studies aimed to explore the construction of meaning in school leadership and ML through a holistic approach (Hirsh & Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2019; Shaked & Schechter, 2017).

Analysis and Exploration of Practices and Roles: A large part of the production analyzed centered its study objectives on the identification of key functions and roles that the professionals interviewed or studied developed in their education centers (Edwards-Groves et al., 2019; Ng & Szeto, 2016). However, their results are difficult to generalize, as they were centered on specific populations, and even on experiences in individual educational centers (Branson et al., 2016).

Learning of the ML: Some studies coincided on the need to examine the learning needs and challenges, as well as the training processes of middle leaders (Bryant & Walker, 2024; Franken et al., 2015; Ng, 2015; Zhang et al., 2022), as well as to stress how these leaders learned to lead in contexts of basic and higher education (Inman, 2011).

Experiences and self-perceptions as leaders: To discover the perception of the education professionals in their role as leaders, as well as their experiences holding positions and their expectations while doing so.

In addition, other studies have centred on aspects that are difficult to classify and group due to the great variety of study objectives found. However, it can be affirmed that all of them tried to identify aspects, traits and characteristics of ML based on their own experiences or local study populations.

3.5. Challenges and emerging topics in research on ML

In the last few years, a growing interest has been observed with respect to middle leaders, as shown by the proliferation of studies and research that focus on this figure. Nevertheless, the challenges that are posed, as well as the emerging topics to be studied are different, among which we identified the following, according to the texts analyzed:

Performance and Responsibilities of Middle Leadership. There is still many topics to be defined, such as topics related with areas of intervention and responsibilities such as management of staff, specific aspects of school work, and cross-cutting areas such as ICTs, student's well-being, curriculum, and teacher development (Franken et al., 2015). In addition, we also find, processes of adaptation to changing needs (Creaton & Heard-Lauréote, 2021), and new focus areas such as inclusive education and sustainability. It is important to consider flexibility, with respect to areas of intervention of middle leaders, which allow them to adapt to changing needs in educational settings. Lastly, it is crucial to define the priorities in their functions: teaching in the classroom, supporting the learning and professional development of the teachers, the integration of technology, and fomenting collaborative settings.

Professional Development and Skills Necessary. It is essential to not only have an influence on interpersonal and strategic leadership abilities and skills, but also on selection and training processes. This would imply a continuous process of professional development (Nguyen & Lee, 2023) that would help balance the education policies and ideals with the current, changing reality (Jones & White, 2021). In short, professional development must also include formal training modules of leadership and management of education training.

Impact of Middle Leadership. It is important to analyze the consequences of support from management (Cortez & Zoro, 2016). According to Lipscombe, Grice et al. (2020) and Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford et al. (2020), we must not forget the development of conducive conditions guaranteed by the clarity of roles, the time and spaces available, adequate material and economic conditions, and correct organizational structures (Jones & Green, 2021) that have an influence on the promotion of the efficacy of a middle leader.

Collaboration and Relationships in Middle Leadership. Authors such as Koh et al. (2011) express their interest in analyzing the collaboration-based relationships created around the figure of the middle leader, pointing out to the importance of sustained and trustworthy relationships with managers, teacher colleagues, and novel teachers. Irvine & Brundrett (2019) and Koh et al. (2011) sustain that the creation of support groups and trust among teachers, through collegial relationships, helps to understand and provide evidence of the effectiveness of the figure of the middle leader in the school organization. An effective collaboration requires appropriate

material and economic conditions, as well as an environment of support that promotes co-learning and co-design (Koh et al., 2011).

Documentation and Conceptualization of Middle Leadership. It is fundamental to seek the replication of studies in different contexts (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017) that allow for international validation and generalization of the results. Research and the provision of evidence is key (Grice, 2019) for clarifying this figure, avoiding conceptual confusions, for example, in terms of teacher leadership (Hirsh & Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2019), and eliminating the persistent tensions between operational and strategic elements of the role they must play, and their efficacy in the results of the educational organization.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the evolving field of middle leadership (ML) in educational settings, shedding light on both conceptual and practical aspects of the role. Below, the results are discussed in relation to the research questions posed, situating them within the broader context of existing literature and identifying implications for future research and practice.

4.1 What research methods predominate in the field of middle leadership?

The analysis reveals that qualitative methods dominate research in middle leadership, with case studies and interviews being the most commonly employed approaches. This reflects the field's focus on exploring the nuanced, context-dependent nature of ML roles, as these methods enable a deep understanding of the experiences and practices of middle leaders. However, the scarcity of quantitative and mixed-methods studies, as well as the underutilization of advanced analytical techniques like structural equation modeling, highlights a gap in the field. Future research could benefit from integrating these methodologies to validate findings across broader populations and contexts, offering a more robust evidence base for theoretical and practical advancements in ML.

4.1. Conceptualization and Characteristics of Middle Leaders

The study underscores the lack of a unified conceptual framework for middle leadership, with varying definitions grounded in the roles, responsibilities, and organizational positions of MLs. This conceptual diversity, while reflective of the complexity and adaptability of ML, presents a challenge for achieving international consensus. It can be affirmed that there is no univocal definition of middle leadership. However, the studies coincided in identifying middle leaders as those who take on formal responsibilities and tasks related to leadership and management,

within a level that lays between management and teachers. Their intermediate position allows them to act as effective links between management and teaching staff, easing communication and the implementation of policies (Brown et al., 2023; Carter et al., 2022).

According to Zhang & Li (2023), the conceptualization of middle leadership is still evolving, especially as a response to changes in global educational policies. The roles and functions of middle leaders in educational settings are diverse, encompassing everything from administrative and bureaucratic tasks to strategic functions oriented towards the continuous improvement of pedagogic practices (Nguyen & Lee, 2023).

4.2. Practical Implications for Schools and Teaching Staff

One of the key findings of this study is the ambiguity surrounding the competencies required for middle leadership roles. Despite interpersonal and communication skills being widely recognized as essential (Jones & White, 2021; Walker & Zhao, 2024), there remains a lack of consensus on the full range of competencies needed for middle leaders to succeed. This has significant implications for schools and teaching staff. First, it highlights the importance of developing clear, coherent criteria for selecting and training middle leaders. Without such guidelines, the risk of arbitrary selection and insufficient training is high, which can affect the effectiveness of leadership in schools.

Additionally, the inclusion of new areas such as inclusive education and sustainability is reshaping the role of middle leadership. These shifts require middle leaders to adapt their skills and approaches, incorporating broader, more diverse educational priorities into their leadership practice (Skerritt et al., 2023). Schools must therefore invest in continuous professional development for middle leaders to ensure they are prepared to manage these evolving responsibilities. This could include providing training in emerging fields, such as educational technology, sustainability, and inclusive education, while also fostering emotional and social competencies that contribute to a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

The lack of a unified framework for middle leadership and the underdevelopment of training programs are areas that require urgent attention. Effective middle leadership is critical in bridging the gap between school management and teaching staff, and its development can directly impact the quality of education. Schools and policymakers must prioritize the creation of consistent, evidence-based training programs that address the broadening scope of middle leadership, ensuring that these leaders have the tools to meet the demands of a dynamic educational landscape.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, middle leadership in educational settings is characterized by a lack of a uniform conceptualization and a diversity of roles and functions that are dependent on the specific educational context. Despite its crucial position as a link between management and the teaching staff, a clear definition of its competences is still a challenge.

The present systematic review has provided evidence on the challenges that arise to contribute towards an improvement in the efficacy of leadership in educational settings, to benefit both educators and students. We cannot forget that some limitations are present in the present study, such as delimiting the period of time to the last 10 years, and the focus in the analysis of a specific number of articles, which may lead to a double-sided bias: that of publication, as it is known that studies with positive or significant results have a greater probability of being published, than those with negative or null results, which may bias the conclusions of the review. And a selection bias derived from the inclusion and exclusion criteria utilized, which may have left some studies aside.

Despite these limitations, exhaustive searches were performed in key databases, and clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established, following a pre-defined search protocol based on the PRISMA guidelines for bibliographic searches, to thereby document every step. This procedure helped to mitigate the limitations, to provide results that indicate the existing trend with respect to studies on the figure of the ML.

6. Challenges and Emerging Topics

Several challenges in ML research and practice emerge from this study. The lack of clarity in the responsibilities and priorities of MLs, coupled with inconsistent documentation and conceptualization, hampers the role's development and recognition. Furthermore, while MLs are often seen as drivers of educational improvement, their potential is undermined by organizational constraints, such as limited time, resources, and structural support.

Emerging topics, such as the role of MLs in inclusive education, sustainability, and technology integration, indicate a shift towards broader and more strategic responsibilities. The growing emphasis on collaboration and relational trust within school organizations also highlights the evolving nature of ML. Establishing supportive environments that facilitate co-learning and trust-building among teachers and leaders is essential for maximizing the impact of MLs.

7. Implications for Future Research and Practice

The study highlights the need for a more comprehensive research agenda on ML. Future research should aim to develop and validate standardized frameworks for defining and evaluating ML roles and competences. Also explore the direct and indirect impacts of ML on student outcomes, teacher development, and organizational performance. Finally, future research should investigate the efficacy of various training models and their applicability across diverse educational contexts.

In practice, educational institutions must prioritize the formalization of ML roles, ensuring that these leaders are equipped with the necessary skills, resources, and support.

Declaration of interest statement: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement: The collated de-identified data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

8. References

- Bassett, M. (2016). The role of middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools: Expectations and challenges. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 21(1).
<https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v21i1.194>
- Bolívar, A. (2020). Liderazgos que transforman la escuela. *Revista Aula de Innovación Educativa*, 290, 10-13.
- Branson, C. M., Franken, M., & Penney, D. (2016). Middle leadership in higher education: A relational analysis. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 44(1), 128-145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214558575>
- Brown, A., Smith, J., & Wilson, R. (2023). The evolving role of middle leadership in educational institutions. *Journal of Educational Leadership*, 35(2), 123-140.
- Bryant, D. A. (2019). Conditions that support middle leaders' work in organizational and system leadership: Hong Kong case studies. *School Leadership & Management*, 39(5), 415-433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1489790>
- Bryant, D. A., Lun, W. Y., & Adames, A. (2020). How middle leaders support in-service teachers' on-site professional learning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 100, Art. 101530. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2019.101530>
- Bryant, D. A., & Walker, A. (2024). Principal-designed structures that enhance middle leaders' professional learning. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 52(2), 435-454. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221084154>
- Bush, T. (2023). The importance of middle leadership for school improvement. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 51(2), 267-269.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221144628>
- Bush, T., & Ng, A. (2019). Distributed leadership and the Malaysia Education Blueprint: From prescription to partial school-based enactment in a highly centralised context. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 57(3), 279-295. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-11-2018-0206>

- Cantón, I. (2021). Reseña: El liderazgo humilde de los mandosintermedios. Los que consiguen que las cosas se hagan, cambien y sucedan. *Education Siglo XXI*, 39(1), 377-380. <https://revistas.um.es/educatio/article/view/469341>
- Carter, D., Lee, M., & Thompson, S. (2022). Flexibility and adaptation in middle leadership: Meeting the needs of modern education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 50(1), 45-62.
- Chapman, C., Muijs, D., Reynolds, D., Sammons, P., & Teddlie, C. (2016). *The Routledge International Handbook of Educational Effectiveness and Improvement: Research, Policy, and Practice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315679488>
- Cortez, M., & Zoro, B. (2016). *El rol estratégico de los liderazgos medios al interior de las escuelas para la mejora escolar: Una mirada desde la literatura internacional* (Nota Técnica N.º 8). Líderes educativos, Centro de Liderazgo para la Mejora Escolar, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso. <https://www.lidereseducativos.cl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/NT-8.pdf>
- Creton, J., & Heard-Lauréote, K. (2021). Rhetoric and reality in middle management: The role of heads of academic departments in UK universities. *Higher Education Policy*, 34(2), 195-217. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-018-00128-8>
- De Nobile, J. (2018). Towards a theoretical model of middle leadership in schools. *School Leadership & Management*, 38(4), 395-416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2017.1411902>
- Edwards-Groves, C., & Grootenboer, P. (2021). Conceptualising five dimensions of relational trust: implications for middle leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, 41(3), 260-283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2021.1915761>
- Edwards-Groves, C., Grootenboer, P., Hardy, I., & Rönnerman, K. (2019). Driving change from 'the middle': middle leading for site-based educational development. *School Leadership & Management*, 39(3-4), 315-333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1525700>

- Farchi, T., & Tubin, D. (2019). Middle leaders in successful and less successful schools. *School Leadership & Management*, 39(3-4), 372-390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1550389>
- Forde, C., Hamilton, G., NíBhróithe, M., Nihill, M., & Rooney, A. M. (2019). Evolving policy paradigms of middle leadership in Scottish and Irish education: implications for middle leadership professional development. *School Leadership & Management*, 39(3-4), 297-314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1539962>
- Franken, M., Penney, D., & Branson, C. (2015). Middle leaders' learning in a university context. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 37(2), 190-203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2015.1019120>
- Fullan, M. (2015). *The new meaning of educational change*. Teachers college press.
- Ganon-Shilon, S., & Schechter, C. (2017). Making sense of school leaders' sense-making. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(4), 682-698. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216628536>
- Ghamrawi, N. (2010). No teacher left behind: Subject leadership that promotes teacher leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 38(3), 304-320. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143209359713>
- Grice, C. (2019). Leading pedagogical reform. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 22(3), 355-370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2018.1463462>
- Grootenboer, P., Edwards-Groves, C., & Rönnerman, K. (2015). Leading practice development: voices from the middle. *Professional Development in Education*, 41(3), 508-526. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2014.924985>
- Gu, Q., Sammons, P., & Chen, J. (2018). How Principals of Successful Schools Enact Education Policy: Perceptions and Accounts From Senior and Middle Leaders. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 17(3), 373-390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2018.1496344>
- Gurr, D. (2019). School middle leaders in Australia, Chile and Singapore. *School Leadership & Management*, 39(3-4), 278-296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1512485>

- Harris, A., & Jones, M. S. (2017). Professional Learning Communities: A Strategy for School and System Improvement? *Wales Journal of Education*, 19(1), 16-38.
<https://doi.org/10.16922/wje.19.1.2>
- Highfield, C., Webber, M., & Woods, R. (2024). Culturally responsive middle leadership for equitable student outcomes. *Education Sciences*, 14(3), Art. 327.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14030327>
- Hirsh, Å., & Bergmo-Prvulovic, I. (2019). Teachers leading teachers – understanding middle-leaders' role and thoughts about career in the context of a changed division of labour. *School Leadership & Management*, 39(3-4), 352-371.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1536977>
- Inman, M. (2011). The journey to leadership for academics in higher education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 39(2), 228-241.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143210390055>
- Irvine, P. A., & Brundrett, M. (2019). Negotiating the next step: The part that experience plays with middle leaders' development as they move into their new role. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 47(1), 74-90.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217720457>
- Jones, M., & Green, P. (2021). Emotional and social competencies in leadership development. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(4), 567-589.
- Jones, P., & White, H. (2021). Collaborative learning environments and middle leadership. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 92, Art. 103083.
- Koh, H. H., Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., & Ang, L. (2011). How school leaders perceive the leadership role of middle leaders in Singapore primary schools? *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 12, 609-620. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-011-9161-1>
- LaPointe-McEwan, D., DeLuca, C., & Klinger, D. A. (2017). Supporting evidence use in networked professional learning: the role of the middle leader. *Educational Research*, 59(2), 136-153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2017.1304346>

- Lárusdóttir, S. H., & O'Connor, E. (2017). Distributed leadership and middle leadership practice in schools: A disconnect? *Irish Educational Studies*, 36(4), 423-438.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2017.1333444>
- Lee, A. N. (2014). Understanding teacher empowerment: Teachers' perceptions of principal's and immediate supervisor's empowering behaviours, psychological empowerment and work-related outcomes. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 41, 67-79.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.03.006>
- Leithwood, K. (2009). *¿Cómo liderar nuestras escuelas? Aportes desde la investigación*. Fundación Chile, Área de Educación.
- Li, S. C., Poon, A. Y. K., Lai, T. K. H., & Tam, S. T. C. (2021). Does middle leadership matter? Evidence from a study of system-wide reform on English language curriculum. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 24(2), 226-243.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2018.1529823>
- Lipscombe, K., Grice, C., Tindall-Ford, S., & De Nobile, J. (2020). Middle leading in Australian schools: Professional standards, positions, and professional development. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(5), 406-424.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2020.1731685>
- Lipscombe, K., Tindall-Ford, S., & Grootenboer, P. (2020). Middle leading and influence in two Australian schools. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 48(6), 1063-1079. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219880324>
- Lipscombe, K., Tindall-Ford, S., & Lamanna, J. (2023). School middle leadership: A systematic review. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 51(2), 270-288.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220983328>
- Maureira, O., Moforte, C., & González, G. (2014). Más liderazgo distribuido y menos liderazgo directivo: Nuevas perspectivas para caracterizar procesos de influencia en los centros escolares. *Perfiles educativos*, 36(146), 134-153.
<https://doi.org/10.22201/iissue.24486167e.2014.146.46033>

- Ng, P. T. (2015). What is quality education? How can it be achieved? The perspectives of school middle leaders in Singapore. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 27(4), 307-322. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-015-9223-8>
- Ng, S.-W., & Szeto, S.-Y. E. (2016). Preparing school leaders: The professional development needs of newly appointed principals. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 44(4), 540-557. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214564766>
- Nguyen, P., & Lee, T. (2023). Integrating technology in middle leadership training programs. *Computers & Education*, 183, Art. 104525.
- Olondriz-Valverde, A., del Arco, I., i Mercadé-Melé, P. (2024). El liderazgo intermedio en la investigación educativa: Un estudio bibliométrico. *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management*, 12(3), 193–224. <https://doi.org/10.17583/ijelm.14765>
- Olondriz-Valverde, A., del Arco, I., & Teixidó, J. (2025). Education cycle coordinators as middle leaders: the roles they play. *Sustainability*, 17(8), Art. 3470. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17083470>
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J. M., Akl, E. A., Brennan, S. E., Chou, R., Glanville, J., Grimshaw, J. M., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M. M., Li, T., Loder, E. W., Mayo-Wilson, E., McDonald, S., i Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, 71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
- Pinto, V., Galdames, S., & Rodriguez, S. (2010). Knowledge development and challenges for the formation of intermediate leaders of educational organizations. *Psicoperspectivas*, 9(2), 136-157. <https://doi.org/10.5027/psicoperspectivas-Vol9-Issue2-fulltext-123>
- Preston, D., & Floyd, A. (2016). Supporting the role of Associate Dean in universities: An alternative approach to management development. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 70(3), 264-280. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12099>

- Rincón, S. (2018). Las redes escolares como entornos de aprendizaje para los líderes escolares. En J. Weinstein, & G. Muñoz (Eds.), *Cómo cultivar el liderazgo educativo. Trecemiradas* (pp. 355-388). Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales.
- Robinson, V. (2019). Towards a strong leadership centered on the student: Facing the challenge of change. *Revista Electrónica Educare*, 13(1), 123-145.
<https://doi.org/10.14244/198271993068>
- Sans-Martin, A., Guardia, J., & Triado-Ivern, X. M. (2016). El liderazgo educativo en Europa: Una aproximación transcultural. *Revista de Educación*, 371, 83-106.
- Sepúlveda, R. (2019). *Efecto de prácticas de liderazgo intermedio y alineamiento de prácticas pedagógicas en el logro académico en las asignaturas de Lenguaje y Matemáticas en escuelas secundarias chilenas* [Tesis doctoral, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile]. Repositorio UC. <https://doi.org/10.7764/tesisUC/EDU/48423>
- Sepúlveda, R., & Volante, P. (2019). Instructional middle leadership: International approaches for professional development in Chilean schools. *Profesorado: Revista de Currículum y Formación de Profesorado*, 23(3), 341-362.
<https://doi.org/10.30827/profesorado.v23i3.11231>
- Shaked, H., & Schechter, C. (2017). Systems thinking among school middle leaders. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(4), 699-718.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143215617949>
- Shaked, H., & Schechter, C. (2019). School middle leaders' sense making of a generally outlined education reform. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 18(3), 412-432.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2018.1450513>
- Skerritt, C., McNamara, G., Quinn, I., O'Hara, J., & Brown, M. (2023). Middle leaders as policy translators: Prime actors in the enactment of policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 38(4), 567-585. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2021.2006315>
- Supovitz, J. (2018). Teacher leaders' work with peers in a quasi-formal teacher leadership model. *School Leadership & Management*, 38(1), 53-79.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2017.1389718>

- Tang, J., Bryant, D. A., & Walker, A. D. (2022). School middle leaders as instructional leaders: Building the knowledge base of instruction-oriented middle leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 60(5), 511-526. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-01-2022-0018>
- Taylor, A. J., & Thompson, P. (2023). Leading for success in flexi schools. *Leadership and Management Journal of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders*, 29, 64-74.
- Thornton, K., Walton, J., Wilson, M., & Jones, L. (2018). Middle leadership roles in universities: Holy grail or poisoned chalice. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 40(3), 208-223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2018.1462435>
- Velarde, J. M., Ghani, M. F., Adams, D., & Cheah, J. H. (2022). Towards a healthy school climate: The mediating effect of transformational leadership on cultural intelligence and organisational health. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 50(1), 163-184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220937311>
- Walker, A., & Zhao, Y. (2024). Redefining middle leadership: Sustainability and inclusivity in educational contexts. *School Leadership & Management*, 42(2), 193-210.
- Zadok, A., Benoliel, P., & Schechter, C. (2024). School middle leaders' transformational leadership and organizational resilience: The moderating role of academic emphasis. *European Journal of Education*, 59, e12657. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12657>
- Zhang, L., & Li, X. (2023). Conceptualizing middle leadership in global education policies. *Global Education Review*, 10(3), 345-361.
- Zhang, X., Wong, J. L. N., & Wang, X. (2022). How do the leadership strategies of middle leaders affect teachers' learning in schools? A case study from China. *Professional Development in Education*, 48(3), 444-461. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2021.1895284>